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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether student-constructed grading criteria complicate or reduce teacher or programmatic standards and determined whether written criteria actually drive students' writing and revising processes. Published criteria for evaluating compositions in 22 college and university writing programs across the nation were analyzed. In terms of both frequency and commentary, idea or focus, organization, development, word choice and usage, were approximately equal and double that of the next category, style. While audience and purpose are listed as categories on one-fourth of the criteria, they appear frequently in descriptions of other categories. In a case study of revising processes, Shon, a student in a sophomore level, source-based, composition classroom at Illinois State University, was interviewed and participated in a talking aloud protocol regarding generation of text and the revision of text. In his revision protocol, Shon refers to what he is doing 41 times, devoting most of his attention to choosing the right words, adding detail or focus, and making corrections of punctuation. Four experienced instructors at Western Illinois University read the same draft and made suggestions for revision. Of the 22 suggestions by the four teachers, Shon addressed 18 of them in his revision. Findings suggest that the use of grading standards, especially written criteria, when problematized across a range of writing situations, may be a highly productive teaching strategy. (RS)

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Presented At 4C's Conference, San Diego, April 1, 1993.

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Standards of Performance: Evaluating Grading Standards and Their Role in Student Revision Processes

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One of the pedagogical needs that teachers of composition have traditionally identified is that of developing an effective way to teach students to see and re-see the texts that they produce. Teachers have responded in part to this need by providing students with descriptions or characteristics of good writing--these to help form a lens through which students could read their own and others' texts critically. Perhaps the most common solution has been that of presenting students with evaluative criteria and then using that criteria to establish writing goals, to study models, to structure reader response or peer response prompts, and to explain or defend the grades that students receive for the products they construct.

But criteria on which those grades are based do not enter the classroom all-at-once with any kind of fixed meaning. Both teachers and students bring criteria with them and negotiate multiple meanings through a series of writing assignments, reader responses and instructional activities that enable production and assessment of written products.

Student-constructed criteria derive from the educational histories of each student. Teacher educational histories, including their professional development experience, inform both the criteria they construct and the kind of reader of student texts they are.

The two purposes of this study are to examine the criteria that teachers and students bring into the classroom to determine if student-constructed criteria complicate or reduce teacher or programmatic standards, and to determine if written criteria actually drive students' writing, and especially revising processes. These seem particularly important in light of the number of hours teachers spend grading texts and referring to criteria in their written responses to various drafts of student work.

To determine the programmatic standards that teachers represent, I compared the published criteria for evaluating composition of twenty-two

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college and university writing programs across the nation. The sets of evaluative standards from these institutions were analyzed in terms of the standards that they listed most frequently and about which they wrote the most copy. Values were selected from descriptions of "A," "excellent," "highest." or "5" or "6" categories, catagories that traditionally describe "good writing."

In terms of both frequency and commentary, idea or focus, organization, development, word choice and usage are approximately equal and double that of the next category, style.

A word count, based on the language that constructs these written standards, reveals the presence of many values. For example, the word "vivid" appears two times, "creativity" three, "analysis" and "plan" four, "pattern" five, "originality" six, "punctuation" and "spelling" eight, "word choice" 10, "emphasis" 11, "vocabulary" and "diction" 12. Transition, voice, tone, detail and logic appear 13 times. The word "organization" appears 11, "development" 29, idea, focus, or topic 33.

While audience and purpose are listed as categories on only slightly more than one fourth of these programs' criteria, they appear frequently in descriptions of other categories. Audience or reader, for example, appears 32 times, and purpose is mentioned 28. These numbers suggest that their importance is greater than might be gauged by looking only at frequency counts and commentary lengths. For example, idea, development, organization, style, usage and evidence are each said to be "appropriate" to audience. The word "appropriate" appears 25 times. Two other qualifiers also stick out. Clarity (or clear) appears 36 times, and effective 20. "Effective" is used to describe reader engagement, organization, style, tone, coherence, and development. Authors suggest the value of a clear thesis, clear focus, clear organization, clear development, clear transitions, and clear identification of purpose and audience. And word choice is supposed to be appropriate, effective and clear.

One standard that remains consistent with the historic construction of written criteria throughout this century in the United States is the expectation that students will write some form of rule-driven English. Whether referenced as edited American English, Standard English, a dominant dialect, or the discourse convention appropriate to the writer's intended reader, the

number of references to usage, punctuation, grammar, spelling, and sentence structure places this category within a continuing, most valued category.

The results of this survey, then, are that the standards most often brought to the classroom by teachers as representatives of institutions include organization, idea or focus, development, diction, edited English, audience, purpose, and to a lesser but still significant extent, the writer's personal style. This latter value is supported by a variety of traits that have to do with engagement, commitment, voice, creativity, and originality and stresses the writer's investment in her language and her ability to engage her reader.

When a student asks, "What do I have to do to write an A paper?" or when a colleague at a workshop asks, "What is an A paper?" a short, easy answer can only be reductive. There is no single standard, or set of standards that address the wide range of writing situations, genres and purposes that construct writers and readers. And the standards that are taught are given dynamically fluid meaning by teachers and students on an assignment-by-assignment basis. For example, in some writing situations, a narrative structure is appropriate. In another, a thematic organization is more effective. In still another, such as a biology lab report, a discipline-specific structure is required. And in all situations, each standard or value is interpreted in terms of all other standards and the overall effect or response that is created.

In the single case study I wish to discuss, my subject, Shon, is a student in a sophomore level, source-based, composition classroom at Illinois State University. Shon was raised on the western edge of Chicago, attended a large Catholic high school with a large suburban population, and hopes to join the Chicago Police Force before eventually entering law school. He took four years of honors classes in English in a school that offered honors and accelerated courses. Most of his high school writing occured during his first two years. He claims that the last two were dominated by literature courses in which tests included essay questions but little other writing was required in response to reading. He characterized himself as a B-/C+ student in these honors courses.

He remembers his high school experience as being shaped by a "strict grading scale." To get an "A," he says, "you had to know your grammar because that's what was probably stressed the most. You had to write at your level. They stressed vocabulary too." Shon's school also provided students with a student handbook that covered grading procedures, including a scale. Of his

experience, he says, "Most teachers had their own style. Every teacher was different when it came to grading. Some of them were lenient, some did everything by the book." He had two comments about grading standards: (1) "It helps you get started off because you know you have to write a certain way and you kind of get used to writing that style." (2) On written criteria--"It's a goal actually. It gives you a goal to work for. Maybe you'll concentrate on one of the items more than another but you still have it in your head that most good papers consist of those items, those guidelines."

During the second day of my class, I asked students to list the qualities that characterized an excellent paper. Shon listed these: No "spelling and grammar errors, appearance of the paper, peer or professional level vocabulary, humor when appropriate helps people to understand your point and relate to you; a current topic because people like to know about the world and how to get by in it." Eleven weeks later, I asked him the same question during a taped interview. His new criteria was whether the paper makes sense, is appropriately organized, has a style that keeps the reader interested, and has no spelling or punctuation errors. At that time, he restated his belief that grading standards serve as writing goals. He said that his first draft was an attempt to get everything on paper so he could do something with the material. When he revised, he tried to think about how his work would be graded to give him things to look for as he read his work. He also listed as revision goals those of making his writing interesting to his readers, eliminating wordiness to keep his reader's attention, getting main points across quickly, and aiming at a certain type of reader. He commented that "appropriate writing for appropriate audiences is the main thing." The primary differences between Shon's entry and exit standards are the additions of making sense, addressing an audience, finding an appropriate organization, and eliminating wordiness.

Shon participated in a talking aloud protocol, one hour of which was devoted to generating a text and a second hour--a day later--devoted to revision. During his generation of text, Shon referred to the assignment once, identified a brief passage that he would revise later, referred to the focus of his paper four times, writing goals three times (to revise, to include several points, to write a summary conclusion), development six times, and wording, word choice or rephrasing eight times. In the draft in which he says he is primarily trying to get everything down so he can do something with it, he is

actually most concerned with wording, developing his ideas, sticking with his focus, constructing writing goals as he generates, and making sure he is following the assignment. He made twenty-two remarks.

In a taped interview, Shon told me what revision meant to him. "The first thing I do, " he reports, "is see if it makes sense and if it's organized the right way." He says he wants to "keep everything structured and use a good writing style to keep the reader interested, and make sure there's no spelling errors or punctuation errors." He adds, "When I'm finished with the paper, I look at the paper and try and think how you grade them." He says, "I try to make that writing as interesting as possible, try to eliminate wordiness."

In his revision protocol, Shon seems far more active, referring to what he is doing 41 times. Once again, he devotes most of his attention to choosing the right words to make a statement sound better or be more precise, 10 times, or nearly a fourth of his considerations. He refers to development to add detail or focus or to clarify a point nine times. He makes corrections, primarily of typing errors, but also of punctuation and spelling, eight times. He refers to organization, elimination of sentences that lack focus or relevance or are deemed repetitive, and writing goals (wording, spelling, organization, and development) four times each. He refers to audience and assignment once each.

I asked four colleagues, experienced instructors and professors at Western Illinois University, to read Shon's draft and to make suggestions toward revision. Western does not published criteria for evaluating composition and these teachers were unaware of the learning goals, classroom experiences, or process orientation I took to the teaching of my students at Illinois State. And they had not been involved in a recent grading session. My intent was to compare their revision suggestions with Shon's actual revisions and with the criteria I have previously presented.

Altogether, the four teacher responses provided 24 revision prompts. They were remarkably similar.

The first teacher suggested that Shon avoid any reference to the assignment and "just do it." He found a contradiction between the second and third paragraphs and suggested some kind of integration of the first and fourth.

The second teacher said that Shon's focus on the assignment was not clear enough, his organization was too obvious, and he called for further development of ideas, specifically directed to the assignment.

The third teacher told Shon that his focus emerged in the third and fourth paragraphs but remained unclear and fragmented. She suggested a different organizational pattern, suggested that he develop his points further, avoid overstatements, use spellcheck and read his paper aloud to identify word omissions and choppy sentences.

The fourth reader pointed out a repetitive sentence, asked for a specific detail to be added, suggested that he use Spellcheck and read his paper aloud to identify missing words and awkward sentences.

All four teachers suggested some kind of reorganization. All identified a problem with the last paragraph and the first paragraph. All suggested further development of the points he made. Three of the four pointed out the presence of missing words and misspelled words. In terms of grading standards, these four teachers referred to focus, organization, development, conventions (sentence structure, punctuation and spelling), word choice, and audience--criteria most frequently valued by writing programs.

These criteria also informed Shon's actual writing and revising processes when he was asked to write in a timed session. Shon referred to all of these during his protocol.

Something I find interesting is that Shon addressed problems with his paper 41 times during his revising period. He was given no feedback and no evaluative prompt at any time during his generating-revising protocol. Nevertheless, of the 22 suggestions by these four teachers, Shon addressed (4) (3) (6) (5): 18 of their concerns in his revision, including the addition of a specific bit of information that one teacher requested. Shon ran out of time before he could use Spellcheck but I note that eight of his revision acts involved the identification and correction of spelling errors and missing words, and the insertion of a comma, and that he referred to using Spellcheck as a goal during both his generating and revising protocol.

On the basis of a single case study, I can't conclude anything beyond the need for further study, but I think this study suggests that the use of grading standards, especially written criteria, when problemitized across a range of writing situations, may be a highly productive teaching strategy. Shon's revision strategies are remarkably in tune with the written criteria published

by college and university programs as well as with those of English teachers who responded to his draft. Criteria directed both Shon's drafting and revising processes. Further, the standards he brought to the classroom remained a part of his self-monitoring criteria at the same time that he redefined and added to them.

Certainly, the use of written criteria does not solve the problems of teaching effective reading and self-monitoring strategies but written criteria, interpreted frequently in assignment-specfic contexts, seems to add significantly to the construction of an informed lens that drives student writing processes, especially those of revision. In much the way that a camera works, the lens focuses on different traits, determines what will and will not be observed, moves in and pulls back to allow the eye different perspectives. I think it is productive to address written criteria as a lens that enables students to see and resee their work in progress from many positions and depths of field. Added to the responses of genuinely interested readers, criteria further serve the needs of developing readibility.